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Rethinking the reporting of the mass random shooting – or is it an autogenic massacre?

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Abstract

The crime of the mass random shooting seems frighteningly common, yet around the world there are probably no more than about 26 per year: one per fortnight. The apparent randomness of the crime is one of the aspects which assures it of its publicity. Another is the traditional practice on the part of the gunman (and they are all men) of making a statement about his motives, or leaving a room or a box or a website of his grievances, to be uncovered and wondered at. The media's focus on the genesis and impact of each mass random shooting is in some ways understandable, but it is at the expense of addressing the more common, and more preventable, non-random mass killings such as the murder suicides when a father 'annihilates' his family before turning his gun upon himself. This paper examines a process through which crimes of mass killing have been rethought, to make their similarities and differences clearer. This rethinking has enabled a better identification of, importantly, motive. In time, the process of rethinking may help inform the space and the nature of the media reporting given to these killings, enabling society to manage them better, mitigating their impacts.

Introduction

Existing literature on the nature of the coverage of mass random shootings, from a communication/journalism perspective, is limited. The literature that does exist has frequently been generated by the field of psychology, and it is sometimes asserted that publicity around these killings may lead to copycat effects, as is the case with suicide coverage (Pirkis and Blood, 2001). These approaches are controversial, because they start from the basis of a 'media effects' model, and suppose that what the media covers and the way in which topics are covered may have effects upon audiences.

Even given this controversial position, journalistic practice in Australia is to report suicide in circumspect ways. This is because research on media coverage of suicide demonstrates that when the direct methodology of the suicide is reported, this is a key factor in increasing the likelihood of a copycat effect. Further, suicide-reporting research indicates that there is a particular period following a completed suicide where such coverage will be relevant and may trigger copycat actions (Pirkis et al., 2006; Pirkis and Machlin, 2013). This paper examines the communication framework informing research into mass random murder, its perpetrators, and the role of the media in publicising these events. It raises the possibility that mass random murder reporting might benefit from further thought around possible impacts.

Media Effects

Various aspects of our economy and our culture are predicated upon the belief that the media has effects. For example advertising, media censorship and classification, and rules against media bias all assume that information (and emotion) communicated via the media has effects. The quest to establish unambiguous evidence for the existence of media effects constitutes one of the most determined and long-lived projects in media research. It is also one of the most fruitless. Decades of such research have resulted in mixed outcomes with the balance of probability firmly against the likelihood of predictable, consistent media effects. David Gauntlett, two decades ago, used his full-length book (1995) to argue that “if, after over sixty years of a considerable amount of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified, then we should conclude that they are simply not there to be found” (Gauntlett, 1998).

To some extent, the rising interest in audience studies (Morley, 1992; Ang, 1996) and in the active audience (Clarke, 2000) has paralleled the side-lining of the effects model. One result is that effects research is generally constructed as ignoring the fact that the “television audience [for example] is composed of a wide variety of groups and is not a homogeneous mass” and also that these groups “actively read television in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience” (both from Fiske, 1987: 84). To assume that the media has direct, predictable effects on audiences is to assume that audiences are unable to interpret and contextualise content in an intelligent and analytical manner. Indeed, it is only because children are believed to have a less sceptical approach to media content that much content regulation specifically addresses the under-18s (but see Buckingham, 1993 for evidence that children are also critical viewers). It may be, however, that people who are subject to suicidal ideation and/or fantasies around (what we will shortly call) autogenic massacres are less able to respond critically to relevant media content.

Although research into media influence upon consumers’ constructions of their everyday world began in 1922, with Walter Lippmann’s influential article in *Public Opinion*, ‘The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads’, it was some decades later before there was a general acknowledgement that the media brings distant events to the attention of wider publics and provides a context within which these events are discussed. This perspective led to the growth of ‘agenda setting’ research. This theorises that not everything can be reported; that which is reported cannot have every element of it detailed; and reporters cannot pay equal attention to the elements they cover. It is generally agreed that journalists and editors select what they see as the most important elements of the story, for the purpose of both presentation and consumption. Agenda setting constitutes what McCombs refers to as “An inadvertent by-product of the necessity to focus” (McCombs, 1977; McCombs, 2006; McCombs and Shaw, 1993).

Coleman et al., (2009: 149) suggest that ‘first level’ agenda setting examines the influence of the media based on how much media attention is paid to a particular issue. The second level looks at how the media discusses a story: the “attributes and characters that describe issues, people or other topics in the news, and the tone of those attributes.” We suggest that it is this second level, “attribute agenda setting” (Coleman et al., 2009: 149), that warrants particular attention in relation to the evolution of the

communication of the mass shooting crime. At the same time we agree that there is no simple model of agenda setting through which the media has effects. Instead we acknowledge a multistep flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) whereby the role of 'opinion leaders' mediates the development of a community's opinions.

Framing theory also has usefulness beyond classic media studies approaches. It provides some important elements supporting research undertaken by psychologists and criminologists into the background factors underpinning mass random shootings. News media has adopted a model of reportage around mass shootings that focuses heavily on the exploration of Why? How? and Who? Entman et al., (2009: 179) note that, while there is no consensus among mass communication scholars as to the agreed definition of frames and framing, two broad elements generally apply. They suggest that 'general frames' provide primary "meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987; cited by Entman et al., 2009: 175), while "issue frames": define problems; make moral judgements; and offer possible remedies (Entman, 1993; 2004; cited by Entman et al., 2009: 176). These second-level attributes can also be described as "issue-specific frames" (McCombs, 2006). We will be arguing that the media has a responsibility for reviewing the frames they use to communicate news around a mass random shooting.

Given that the issue or event framed by the media concerns a mass random shooting, then the ways in which the problems, moral judgements, and remedies are communicated impacts upon the nature of the story-telling, and the subsequent consumption of the news story. Framing theory, therefore, provides a basis through which it becomes possible to re-evaluate the reporting of mass random shootings. Entman et al., argue that:

A frame repeatedly invokes the same objects and traits, using identical or synonymous words and symbols in a series of similar communications that are concentrated in a time. These frames function to promote an interpretation of a problematic situation or actor and (implicit or explicit) support of a desirable response, often along with a moral judgment that provides an emotional charge. (2009: 177)

According to this perspective, with each reporting of a new event the news consumer brings to the story (their) existing understanding of the phenomenon, learned and brought forward from previous coverage of equivalent or similar events.

Entman et al., point to the 'diachronic' nature of framing, whereby the consumption of media over time can lead to a particular set of responses to a future event (Entman et al., 2009: 177). When applied to the framing effects of mass random shooting coverage, this diachronic process, where the response to 'time 1' is applied to 'time 2', can cause a diminishing of attention paid to many new aspects of the story that remain relevant, or even crucial. This perspective relates to the contentious suggestion that repeated recourse to a specific framing of a subject can constitute the 'priming' of an audience response. Priming is described by Perse as "automatic activation of a pre-existing schema by a salient cue in the environment" (Perse, 2001: 206). This means that the associations stored alongside the discussion of violence in a news story, such as one about a mass random shooting, can be triggered at a later time.

Once 'activated', these previously-stored associations can trigger the conscious thought processes of the audience member.

In summary, although it constitutes a contested model, media effects research underpins theories around news framing, agenda setting and priming. As yet, journalists have not applied these theories to communication choices in the reportage of the crime of mass random shooting, or the nature of the frames used to discuss the perpetrator, or the potential impact of these upon vulnerable members of news audiences.

Mass Murder in the Media

The killing of a number of random individuals in a single act is not a phenomenon recorded historically in Western culture until the early part of the 20th century. It still remains relatively rare compared with examples of non-random mass killings. Even so, over the years, more violent and unusual crimes have received a disproportionate amount of coverage in the news. Fox and Levin (1998), Dietz (1986), and others, have found that the vast majority of mass murders that have occurred throughout the past 150 years have been an expression of family-based violence. Such crimes occur comparatively often, but receive far less coverage, pro rata, than the mass murder of random individuals in a public place.

The 1960s saw the rise of television as a force in news coverage and scholarly research points to a massacre at the University of Texas in 1966 as the 'first' of the modern mass random shootings (Dietz, 1986; Duwe, 2000; Fox and Levin, 1998; Mullen, 2004; Cantor et al., 2000). Crimes such as a mass random shooting use a different script when told to an audience via a medium that requires strong images for effect, than when the information is conveyed by radio. Further, by the 1960s, daily news crews were more agile than cine news production had been and thus more likely to capture footage of actual events. This early mass shooting "model, or script" (Cantor et al., 2000: 55), inaugurated a frame that has been adopted in equivalent media coverage.

Elements of framing used in the reporting of mass random shootings after 1966 include:

- Extensive descriptors of the perpetrator – who was he, what was he wearing, what kind of guns? (Who?)
- Motive – the attempt to answer the classic news question 'Why?' by investigating the possible motives of the perpetrator, his state of mind, circumstances, and extended versions of descriptors. (Why?)
- Method – how exactly was the crime committed, in detail. (How?)

After the adoption of this framing, from 1966 onwards, mass shootings became a more extensively occurring crime in the West (Cantor et al., 2000). The rise of television as a journalistic force can be seen as influencing both the framing of this crime, and the evolution of the concept of 'fame' in terms of the perpetrator's impact upon the audience. As Serazio notes:

By regularly supplying audiences with an appetite for the visual, 20th-century media – and television in particular – cultivated audiences with the steady wonderment for being visualized themselves [...] It exponentially accelerated our cult of fame. (Serazio, 2010: 418)

As yet, however, there has been little serious consideration in journalistic education as to whether this framing of the mass random shooting, and the resulting ‘fame’ of the mass random shooter, might provide a motivation for the crime. The dramatic increase in the incidence of this form of killing since the widespread adoption of television indicates that this hypothesis deserves attention.

The mass random killing is a specific kind of crime, but it can become confused with other sorts of massacres. Dietz (1986) sought to offer a re-classification of massacres, due to the inadequacies of a single term for a crime that covers several specific aspects. Amongst these new definitions was one for the mass murder of family members (‘family annihilators’) and for those who seek to commit mass murder in absentia (‘set-and-run killers’). Dietz gave the term pseudocommando to the mass random shooter (1986: 482). He also argued, for the first time, that the role of the media was not just an influence on the motivation of the crime, but inherent to it: “The predictably high publicity attending these crimes is among the motives of their perpetrators [...] offenders in each of these categories see headlines as one of the predictable outcomes of their behaviour, which they pursue in part for this purpose” (Dietz, 1986: 477).

This pseudocommando category provided the framework for a more detailed study of factors surrounding the mass random shooting. Mullen (2004) sought to refine the categories further:

- Victim specific mass killings – the victims are pre-identified and intended
- Instrumental mass killings – organised crime or terrorism, where even random deaths serve a specific aim or purpose, or means to an end.
- Massacres:
 - a) Arising from social conflict, such as Rwanda in the 1990s.
 - b) Actions of an individual, or small group, arising from a highly personal agenda.

It is for this final category that Mullen (2004: 313) adopted the term autogenic (self-generated) massacre. Examples of the autogenic massacre include the Port Arthur killings (April 1996) and the Columbine High School massacre (April 1999).

There is as yet no generally accepted name for these events. Cantor et al., for example, refer to the random mass shooting event itself as a civil massacre (2000: 55). Yet these attempts to rethink the communication of the name of the crime constitute an important step in allowing a distinctive separation of the nature of this specific crime (the motives and influences of the perpetrator, and the methodology of the crime itself) from the broader category of ‘mass shooting’.

Paul Mullen, a Professor of Forensic Psychiatry and practicing psychiatrist, researched seven specific case studies and conducted detailed interviews with, and analysis of, the five killers who survived the massacres they perpetrated, including Martin Bryant (Port Arthur 1996) and Julian Knight (Melbourne 1987) (Mullen, 2004). As with previous studies, including Cantor et al. (2000), Mullen found that despite committing random murders, some perpetrators start with people they know, including family members,

before moving on to strangers (Mullen, 2004: 314). Along with other studies, such as that by Hempel et al., (1999) and Meloy et al. (2001), Mullen emphasises the role dying is intended to play in the act of even these surviving killers. Mullen argues that the decision to commit suicide comes first, the idea for dying as part of a particular type of crime, follows (Mullen, 2004: 321).

These murderers are choosing to kill before dying for a reason. We argue that it is necessary for journalists and editors to rethink the communication framing they use in the coverage of these crimes. It is relevant here that the psychological research has found that, in the vast majority of the cases studied, the killer is not deemed to be psychotic, but to understand and intend their actions. As Mullen argues, "Most perpetrators of Autogenic Massacres do not [...] appear to have active psychotic symptoms at the time, and very few even have histories of prior contact with mental health services" (2004: 321). This is in direct contrast to what Dietz called the 'family annihilators' and 'workplace killers', who often have major psychiatric disorders.

Rigoli (2013) conducted a news framing analysis of the coverage of Martin Bryant in The Tasmanian Mercury newspaper. Despite the psychiatric report, supplied to the trial, which confirmed that Bryant was not suffering from a mental illness, Rigoli found the Mercury's reporting focused on "stereotypical representations of 'madness' and 'abnormality'" (Rigoli, 2013: 40). This is in line with Dietz's findings on the reporting of mass shooting perpetrators in general and his argument that the "[t]endency of the press, public and public officials to regard such individuals as mad solely on the basis of their crimes reflects the widespread needs [sic] to attribute such behavior to alien forces" (Dietz, 1986: 479). Partly because such comments create erroneous views about the role of mental illness, journalism educators have recommended guidelines around the use of psychiatric terms in general reporting (Mindframe, 2014). At the same time, however, it is psychiatrists and not journalist educators who suggest that: Recent episodes of school shooting, whereby the perpetrator recorded a message and then disseminated it through the Internet, indicate that school shooting perpetrators desire that other people understand their reasons [...] the media and reports on the Internet could facilitate the diffusion of these potentially lethal norms [...] The development of a code of rules to report on these [mass random shooting] episodes, which are likely to attract the interest of the population for their bloody outcomes, could prevent the dissemination of cultural norms that might encourage this behaviour. (Preti, 2008: 547)

There is a gradual increase in the number of media commentators responding to this suggestion by psychiatrists. Nuener et al. comment that:

Ideally, similar principles as for the coverage about suicide have to be considered for media coverage about [mass random shootings ...] not only glorification, but also demonization, have to be avoided as well as simplification of the motive to prevent identification by persons at risk.

Information on methods of killing [...] should never be given in detail. (Neuner et al., 2009: 578).

Shulman suggests it is time to ask: "How might journalists and police change their practices to discourage mass shootings?" He then offers a range of possible responses: "First, they need to do more to deprive the killer of an audience [...] Never publish a shooter's propaganda [...] Hide their names and faces [...] Don't report on biography or speculate on motive [...] Minimize specifics and gory details [...] No photos

or videos of the event [...] tell a different story” (Shulman, 2013: 4). Journalist educators and practitioners are yet to embrace this approach.

The literature directly examining mass random shootings points to an evolving awareness of the specific characteristics underpinning the crime since the first televised shooting in 1966 (Kelleher, 1997; Barry et al., 2013; Cantor et al., 2000; Dietz, 1986; Mullen, 2004). It seems increasingly likely that what Dietz calls pseudocommando; what Cantor et al., describe as a civil massacre, and what Mullen calls the autogenic massacre; is a crime where the assailant intends to die, intends to kill as many people as possible before that death, and wants to receive a specific kind of news coverage following the crime.

These studies indicate that the mass random shooting may be an atypical form of suicide, which responds in part to media reports on previous mass shootings, and anticipates the same kind of media attention as a result of committing a crime of a similar nature. The model under development in psychiatry and gradually gaining attention elsewhere does not comply with the expectations of the copycat effect, which underpins recommendations around the media reporting of suicide (Pirkis and Blood, 2001; Pirkis et al., 2006; Pirkis and Machlin, 2013). Further, few perpetrators ever refer to coverage or interest in a previous crime. Rather, it seems that the mass random shooter desires his own level of ‘fame’ and is adopting a script based on his interpretation/expectation of an existing pattern of media reportage to achieve it. Arguably, there is an ethical argument against fulfilling the wishes of the criminal in these cases (Greensmith and Green, forthcoming). At the same time, changing the media script, along the lines suggested by Schulman (above, 2013), might reduce the likelihood of such crimes occurring. Certainly this possibility deserved wider discussion and attention than it currently receives.

Conclusion

The literature on mass murder tells us there are many forms of this crime, with the mass random shooting not being the most prolific, but being the one that receives the most news coverage, and the strongest framing of news-based communication relating to the killer himself. Psychiatrists argue that the perpetrators intend to die, and generally to kill as many people as they can before dying. Their aim is to achieve a particular type of social status, one that inherently requires a specific type of news coverage of their crime. This includes desiring publicity around their name, their face, and their motivation.

It would appear that the most ‘successful’ mass killers are often the subject of adopted communicative frames emphasising them as ‘mad’, based solely on the nature of their crime. Yet, the psychological literature indicates that only a minority of these perpetrators are diagnosed as having a mental illness. The news media see these events as highly significant and traditionally give saturation coverage to mass random shootings. Despite these events occurring less frequently than many other types of mass murder, and even though they may have fewer victims, mass random shootings generate a disproportionate coverage and result in a more detailed analysis of the perpetrator than almost any other form of crime.

Historical records indicate that the mass random shooting was previously alien to western culture, yet established itself quickly and firmly after widespread access to television. Following the 1966 University of Texas killings, media organisations developed a communication script for the coverage of a mass random shooting. In seeking to frame their news coverage of this crime the questions Who? How? and Why? have been extensively and increasingly the focus of journalistic comment. This standard coverage supports a hypothesis that mass random killers may desire to kill as many people as required to achieve a level of infamy and, with that infamy, the news coverage the killer believes will follow. Mass random shootings, and the death toll they elicit, are not currently increasing in frequency but appear to have reached a steady state, given the current patterns of coverage (Fox and Delateur, 2013: 128-132). Yet the media attention paid to this crime continues to grow. The literature indicates that the way the media covers these events may be a major motivation for the crime itself.

It is important to investigate whether changed reporting of this crime, and the perpetrator, might result in a lessened risk of such events occurring. The careful analysis of these crimes, and an interrogation of differences between the mass random shooting and other forms of mass killing, are an important first step towards that new knowledge. If this approach successfully identifies factors that may motivate and underpin these crimes, such work may be a first step towards reducing their frequency. The debate offers an opportunity for journalists and journalism educators to show leadership in the run-up to the 20th anniversary of the Port Arthur massacre.

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